INTRODUCTION

STATELESS SUBJECTS

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—Gopal Balakrishnan, *Mapping the Nation*

The past decades have seen a broad transformation of China studies into the new Sovietology. In the international sphere, this change has involved, in equal measure, frenzied media denunciations of China's human rights violations, pollution, and military buildup—and at the same time, popular, sensationalist images of mummies, angels, and kung fu-fighting pandas. A culture of martial arts has come to play a surprisingly important role in shaping China’s global identity, delineating the contours of its cultural influence, helping to predict its political transformations, and suggesting ways to interpret its historical formation as a nation-state. Far from being a trivial matter of popular culture, Chinese martial arts are persistently linked—in the imagination of academic critics, political gurus, business entrepreneurs, and social activists—to the master narratives of the twentieth century: capitalism, colonialism, and globalization.

Above all, nationalism has emerged as the most common explanatory paradigm for the study of Chinese martial arts film and literature. Virtually every currently available scholarly work on martial arts fiction connects the genre’s historical rise, aesthetic conventions, and popular appeal to the emotional freight of representing the Chinese nation. For example, the first English-language monograph on a twentieth-century Chinese martial arts novelist, Chris Hamm’s
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Above all, nationalism has emerged as the most common explanatory paradigm for the study of Chinese martial arts film and literature. Virtually every currently available scholarly work on martial arts fiction connects the genre’s historical rise, aesthetic conventions, and popular appeal to the emotional freight of representing the Chinese nation. For example, the first English-language monograph on a twentieth-century Chinese martial arts novelist, Chris Hamm’s
Paper Swordsman: Jin Yong and the Modern Chinese Martial Arts Novel (2005), uses the status of Hong Kong as a British colony to explain the author’s popular appeal to the masses, characterizing his martial arts novels as the embodiment of “a heroic and erotic nationalism.” According to Hamm, Jin Yong’s writings signify the increasing dominance of “an essentialized and celebratory Chinese cultural identity” over a “consciousness of loss and displacement,” which serves as “a point of reference and token of continuity amidst the uncertainties of existence” for the citizens of Hong Kong. Hamm points out that all of Jin Yong’s novels were originally serialized in Hong Kong’s newspapers before appearing in book form, and he argues on this basis that Jin Yong’s martial arts fiction exemplifies Benedict Anderson’s theory of “print-capitalism”—the ability of serialized fiction to create sentiments of diasporic nationalism by allowing readers who have never met each other to imagine themselves as members of a coherent national community: cultural China. In the final analysis, Hamm’s explanation is a psychologizing one. His argument suggests that martial arts literature is a result of the colonial inferiority complex of the citizens of the British Crown Colony. The popularity of the genre is explained by its ideological persuasive-ness rather than its intellectual depth.

This common explanation of martial arts fiction as the ideological instrument of Chinese nationalism, however, has generated a bewildering array of contradictory conclusions. Recent martial arts films such as Hero (2002), Kung Fu Hustle (2004), House of Flying Daggers (2004), and Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (2000) have led critics to characterize the genre as a paean to Chinese authoritarianism, a representation of diasporic consciousness, an apologia for Chinese unification, cultural resistance to Sinocentrism from the margins, an instrument of China’s “kung fu diplomacy,” an index of the exploitation of third-world labor by a Hollywood-centered, capitalist regime of “flexible production,” or the reverse cultural colonization of America by Asia—an “Asian invasion of Hollywood.” While these interpretations contradict one another in their assessment of particular texts’ relation to Chinese nationalism, they share one thing in common: the assumption that martial arts fiction is a
by-product of China’s colonial and postcolonial histories, and that therefore the economic and political organizations of China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan (semicolonial, postcolonial, capitalist, socialist, or postsocialist) should serve as the prevailing analytical framework for our interpretation of this literature.

*Stateless Subjects: Chinese Martial Arts Literature and Postcolonial History* is the first full-length English-language study of the literary genre of *wuxia xiaoshuo*. It explores the forgotten history and aesthetics of a genre whose vital contributions to the development of modern Chinese culture have been suppressed and marginalized as merely popular entertainment. Traditional “state-centered” interpretations emphasize the problem of Chinese identity and the role of the nation-state in the production of the martial arts text. Far from signifying a singular attitude toward the Chinese nation, however, martial arts literature has demonstrated a remarkable ability to unify ideological opposites, an ability that is compounded with the genre’s antisystemic, rhizomatic dispersion across many registers of social discourse. In the popular imaginary, martial arts are commonly associated with ideas of harmony, inner peace, Zen, meditation, alternative medicine, and respect for all sentient beings. They also suggest a human tendency toward aggression and bear an affinity with the realist or pragmatist school of political science that argues for the inevitability of conflict and violence in human civilization. It is also true that images of kung fu readily invoke traumatic memories of war, nationalism, banditry, and political chaos. The malleable nature of martial arts fiction allows it to be assimilated to political claims about the “Sick Man of Asia” and “China rising” with equal ease. Punitive readings emphasize China’s degenerative tendency, citing martial arts as evidence that traditional thinking still holds sway in a country that stubbornly refuses to modernize and open its door to the West. Early twentieth-century Chinese intellectuals, such as Qu Qubai, characterized martial arts fiction as an escapist fantasy, “the dreams of flying swords and kung fu” that deflected the Chinese people’s revolutionary consciousness and receptivity to Marxism. Similarly, contemporary Chinese scholars such as Cao Zhengwen explain the rise of the martial arts
novel in early twentieth-century China as psychological compensation for foreign imperialism, warlordism, and ineffectual government. By contrast, triumphant accounts of the “East Asian Economic Miracle” discover in martial arts a presumably unique cultural ethic that is responsible for China’s accelerated growth in the postsocialist period. Those who applaud the virtues of martial arts read the cinematic and literary depictions of a willingness to endure the trials and tribulations of “cruel training” as evidence for the existence of a “Confucian ethics” analogous to Weber’s postulation of the Protestant spirit of capitalism, arguing that this cultural spirit of sheer determination and hard work has allowed a formerly third-world country to overwrite the historical laws of colonial subjugation to reemerge as the epicenter of global finance and industrial output—the international equivalent of the “model minority myth” in the U.S. domestic context.

Just as the ideological message of martial arts literature is anything but unambiguously nationalist, its cast of characters encompasses a wide spectrum of social and class roles, ranging from monks with white eyebrows flying on magical carpets to hypermuscular ex-socialist athletes. Whereas the image of the emaciated peasant militia accompanies many a history textbook’s representation of modern China as a backward nation torn by war, strife, and third-world underdevelopment, the martial Chinese body is also a recurring image in the media that exemplifies an exceptional racial form of muscular prowess, agility, uniformity, and numerical superiority, one that presages the decline of the West and the coming of the “Pacific Century.” The discursive spaces occupied by martial arts characters are just as likely to be ancient bamboo forests as the postmodern Olympic complexes of Beijing’s Water Cube and Bird’s Nest. What travels under the name of martial arts forms the kernel of a perplexing series of narratives from and about China. To write the political history of martial arts is to investigate these persistent images as vehicles for what we have alternately taken to be a hopelessly stagnant and archaic civilization and a spectacularly rising site of postmodern consumerism.

That the same genre—and often the same works—can animate
mutually contradictory views about China’s relation to the world is one of the most curious features of martial arts aesthetics. I argue in this book that a persistent desire to read martial arts narratives as national allegories has prevented us from developing a historical account of precisely what is interesting and complex about these works. Specifically, no sustained account of twentieth-century martial arts literature as literature—that is, as a historically determinate discourse with a unique set of aesthetic conventions, philosophical basis, institutional history, and thematic coherence—has been forthcoming. The lack of critical attention to the aesthetics of martial arts narratives stems, no doubt, from a widespread perception of martial arts fiction as potboilers for mass culture consumption that have little to say about serious politics. This perception itself rests on the even more fundamental assumption that politics is always state politics, which is precisely what, I will argue, the martial arts novel as a modern literary movement sets out to challenge. If one aim of the present book is to produce a descriptive account of the distinctive aesthetic properties of the genre, another is to resituate this genre as an interventionist and progressive cultural movement in twentieth-century Chinese intellectual history that invented the most important model of nonstatist political responsibility.

Classical European theories of the state since Hobbes, Rousseau, Smith, Hegel, and Marx explain the state as the bureaucratic institution designed to resolve the problem of private property. These theorists are keenly aware of the fact that, left to themselves, “the people” would destroy themselves through the pursuit of individual gain. The modern state purports to represent the general will of the people but in reality constrains it. The theory of classical jurisprudence represents an advance over an earlier model of natural law theory, which casts the state as the formal expression of an abstract form of harmony that originally emanated from God, nature, or some other higher moral authority.

The Chinese martial arts novel represents a radically different political philosophy of the state. In this aesthetic tradition, the state is neither the arbiter of justice nor the sphere of moral constraints that prevents civil society from destroying itself through its own
rapacity. On the contrary, the martial arts novel invents scenes of stateless subjects to explain the constitutive sociality of the self. Its discourse of jianghu (rivers and lakes) defines a public sphere unconnected to the sovereign power of the state, a sphere that is historically related to the idea of minjian (between the people) as opposed to the concept of tianxia (all under heaven) in Chinese philosophy. The martial arts novel presents the human subject as an ethical alterity, constituted by and dependent on its responsibilities to other human beings. It is through the recognition of this mutual interdependence, rather than the formal and positive laws of the state, that humanity manages to preserve itself despite rampant inequalities in privilege, rank, and status. As recounted by martial arts novels, the human subject is made and remade by forces that cannot be defined by positive laws of the state—rage, love, gender, morality, life and death. The formation of this stateless subject is incompatible with the liberal conception of an autonomous rights-bearing citizen.

Max Weber defined the state as the apparatus that monopolizes the legitimate use of violence. The Chinese martial arts novel shifts the arbiter of justice from the state to a special group of martial arts master idiomatically termed xia. This genre does not so much promote private use of violence as it opens up a nonstatist field of political considerations. Chinese martial arts novels dramatize scenarios of moral dilemmas beyond the purview of the nation-state and without recourse to its guarantees. The Chinese martial arts novel, in other words, can be seen as a thought experiment on this question: If we lived in a world where the meaning of politics were not reduced to the ballot-box, revolutions, fiscal crises, wars, and other trappings of governmentality, what would it mean to be a person of public responsibility? The fact that modern Chinese cultures produced such a thought experiment deserves a historical analysis, and the emergence of stateless literature in twentieth-century China provides a powerfully concrete counterexample to the widely accepted thesis that China's response to foreign imperialism has always been the establishment of a strong modern nation-state.
The Martial Arts of China’s Culture War

Certain critics use “martial arts fiction” to refer to both pre–twentieth-century and modern works.¹⁰ We should note that late imperial works are called xiayi rather than wuxia fiction in Chinese and the two genres maintain different statuses in literary history.¹¹ Stimulating works on xiayi have been produced—David Wang, for example, has powerfully argued that xiayi is an expression of the true but “repressed” origins of modern Chinese culture.¹² There is much to gain, however, from a consideration of martial arts literature proper, the distinctiveness of its features, and its fate in modern China, and this move requires that we conceptually separate wuxia from its premodern predecessors.

Despite the global hypervisibility of martial arts cinema, no systematic study of this visual culture's literary basis in Chinese fiction is available in English. Wuxia xiaoshuo, the literary tradition that gave rise to these cultural images and political paradoxes of martial arts, is a novelistic genre unique to Chinese literature that has no satisfactory translation in English.¹³ Known in the West primarily through poorly subtitled films, Chinese martial arts fiction is one of the most iconic and yet the most understudied forms of modern sinophone creativity. Current scholarship on the subject is characterized by three central assumptions that I argue against in this book: first, that martial arts fiction is the representation of a bodily spectacle that historically originated in Hong Kong cinema; second, that the genre came into being as an escapist fantasy that provided psychological comfort to the Chinese people during the height of imperialism;¹⁴ and third, that martial arts fiction reflects a patriotic attitude that celebrates the greatness of Chinese culture, which in turn is variously described as the China-complex, colonial modernity, essentialized identity, diasporic consciousness, anxieties about globalization, or other psychological difficulties experienced by the Chinese people during modernization. Contrary to these perceptions, Stateless Subjects re-interprets martial arts literature as a progressive intellectual critique of modernization theory. I will strive to demonstrate that martial arts culture was first invented as a poetic relation between words rather
than a visual relation between bodies. Not only did the historical rise of martial arts literature predate the rise of martial arts cinema but the culture of martial arts, even in its cinematic incarnations and adaptations, is explicitly concerned with *literariness*, the question of what makes literature distinct from other types of discourses. Over and against commonly accepted interpretations of martial arts fiction as an apolitical form of escapist fantasy, this book presents it as a mode of intellectual intervention that has shaped the course of modern Chinese history.

The historical reason for the genre’s exclusion from the Chinese canon lies precisely in its distance from and incompatibility with Chinese nationalism, which since the Qing dynasty has been a campaign to reform literature with criteria derived from European experiences of modernity. The expansion of modernization discourse into the sphere of literary production in the May Fourth period had rendered alternative (nonmodernization-based) philosophical and literary discourses illegitimate, and martial arts fiction, which has resisted Western models of instrumental reason and rational bureaucracy, was quickly branded as the feudal ideology of “Old China,” an obstacle that must be eradicated from the field of cultural production. While May Fourth intellectuals advocated Western thought as the basis for rapid modernization, martial arts novelists continued to draw upon China’s indigenous intellectual sources—Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and premodern literary models such as linked-chapter fiction. The martial arts novel in Chinese is renowned for the density of its classical poetic devices, historical allusions, philosophical precepts, and sophisticated plots. Indeed, the martial arts novel is the only genre in modern Chinese literature to be written in a semiclassical language after the early twentieth century, when the spoken vernacular Chinese (*baihua*) replaced Classical Chinese (*wenyan*) as the official language of literary communication. Unlike the “universal language” of cinema, the semiclassical language of the martial arts novel is in fact inaccessible to the masses—a fact that bedeviled early twentieth-century Chinese revolutionaries’ attempts to frame the genre as merely “popular fiction.” Viewing the difficulty of the Chinese language as the cause
of mass illiteracy, Chinese intellectuals after May Fourth movement systematically advocated the Europeanization of Chinese syntax or even the replacement of Chinese characters with Romanizations as a recipe for rapid modernization. As a result, martial arts novelists were quickly demonized as “traditionalists” who were holding China back from economic and military modernization. In lieu of martial arts fiction, Chinese reformers sought to create a “New Fiction” (xin wenxue) that could bridge the educational gap between the literary elite and the common masses. For Hu Shi, Chen Duxiu, and Mao Dun, the explosive growth, commercial successes, cultural influence, and greater number of martial arts novels posed a threat to the modernization project undertaken by New Fiction. The chief strategy adopted in the May Fourth crusade against martial arts fiction was to collapse the genre with “mandarin ducks and butterflies” (yuanyang hudié pai) fiction, stories about love published in Saturday and other less respected venues.

The label of popular fiction was nonetheless strictly a May Fourth construction. Before the rise of modernization discourse and developmental thinking in China, martial arts narratives were not seen as popular or even middle-brow fiction, but part of China’s high literary canon. The culture of martial arts has always been a normative and privileged theme in Chinese literature. In this light, it was perfectly natural for twentieth-century authors to continue developing this theme and capitalize on what had always been understood as a cultural achievement in Chinese letters. As indicated by James Liu’s important and massive 1967 study, The Chinese Knight-Errant, the philosophy of martial arts has permeated and dominated virtually every form of premodern Chinese literature for over two thousand years: philosophical treatises, shi and ci poetry, dynastic histories, zawen (“miscellaneous writings”), songs, Tang chuanqi (legends), Ming drama, and prose fiction. Indeed, two of the so-called Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese Literature (sida qishu) are explicit representations of the culture of martial arts: Water Margin and Romance of the Three Kingdoms, and despite being proto-martial arts novels, the two fourteenth-century classics have never been relegated to the status of popular fiction.
We can see that what May Fourth reformers objected to was not martial arts narratives as such, but the existence of such narratives in the twentieth century. Both Mao Zedong and Lu Xun wrote approvingly of premodern narratives of outlaws and martial valor, which they considered to be an expression of the people’s heroic struggles against feudal values, while accusing the modern descendants of the same works of corrupting the minds of the Chinese masses and blocking their revolutionary consciousness. After 1932, martial arts film was banned in China. Martial arts fiction was banned by both the Communist Party in China and the Nationalist government in Taiwan after 1949. In post-1949 mainland China, members of the League of Leftist Writers assumed leading positions in the PRC’s cultural bureaucracy and published literary histories that canonized (socialist) realism as “modern Chinese literature.” Nonrealist trends in early twentieth-century China, such as martial arts fiction, were removed from literary history. The story of modern Chinese literature and Chinese modernity was subsequently told as a unilinear movement toward realism and Europeanized syntax, a feat accomplished through the translations, introductions, and appropriations of Western thought. With the decline and censorship of the genre on the mainland, Hong Kong became the new center for martial arts film and literature after 1949, although Taiwan also produced a significant number of talented and prolific authors despite censorship. The literary historian Lin Baochun actually considers the early period under martial law (1961–1970) to be Taiwan’s “golden age of martial arts literature.”

One of the most salient characteristics of the martial arts novel is its length. The extraordinary number of wuxia works across the twentieth-century makes the genre an unprecedented phenomenon in Chinese literary history. By a conservative count, more than two hundred major novels in the Republican period were published as wuxia xiaoshuo, usually of extraordinary length—Huanzhu Louzhu’s entire corpus consists of no less than an astronomical 10,000,000 words, thirty times the length of Proust’s Swann’s Way. His unfinished magnum opus, Shushan jianxia zhuan (Swordsmen from the Shu Mountains), was serialized in the newspaper Tianfeng Bao
over a span of seventeen years (1932 to 1949), and the project was aborted only because of the Communist Revolution in 1949. The extant chapters of *Shushan jianxia zhuan* were later published in book form in fifty-five separate volumes, with 329 chapters chronicling the rise and fall of more than a thousand different fictional characters.\(^{25}\) By the end of 1949, at least 170 major authors had published *wuxia* stories in different periodicals.\(^{26}\) The most prolific martial arts novelist, Zheng Zhengyin, published 102 different titles. Huanzhu Louzhu has thirty-six works to his name, while Gu Mingdao and Wang Dulu each wrote more than twenty novels before they were forced to abandon their craft under the new government.

Martial arts texts’ concern with literariness is foregrounded by the recurring motif of the “Secret Scripture” (*miji*). A standard formula in *wuxia* films and novels, the Secret Scripture is a lost or carefully guarded ancient text that endows its owner with superhuman combat abilities; the competition or quest for this book forms the main plot of many *wuxia* stories. Significantly, the Secret Scripture is not a training manual with pictorial illustrations of martial moves, but a verbal text written in Classical Chinese (or sometimes in Sanskrit). The Secret Scripture contains instructions that guide the protagonist through a series of inner or spiritual transformations, which is, however, possible only if the protagonist is literate—that is, if the character has access to what in the real world would be termed the educational capital of the dominant class. The narrative tradition of the Secret Scripture is the subject of Stephen Chow’s critically acclaimed 2004 parody of the genre, *Kung Fu Hustle*, in which Yuen Wooping (Yuan Heping), the legendary action cinema choreographer behind *Matrix* and *Kill Bill*, plays the character of a beggar who sells “fake” manuals that turn out to be real Secret Scriptures for the protagonist, played by Stephen Chow himself. The inside joke for those who recognize Yuen is that the action choreographer is the creator of fantastic martial arts, while the wirework, trampolines, and computer-generated images are the real Secret Scriptures. The joke draws its comedic power from a local knowledge of the genre’s tendency to reference textual artifacts.\(^{27}\) Accordingly, the protagonist of the stories is almost
always a scholar rather than a fighter. This choice of protagonist is, of course, consistent with the genre’s advocacy of book learning as the source of martial power.

*Wuxia* is a self-consciously literary discourse that draws attention to the aesthetic properties of language. Its aim is to translate classical Chinese literary and cosmological concepts into a large corpus of easily quotable, memorable phrases. These *wuxia* phrases have by now become endemic in speech situations unrelated to martial arts, such as “*shenhuai jueji*” (a skilled but self-effacing person), “*yitong jianghu*” (unify the nation), “*jinpen xishou*” (close one’s business), and “*tuichu jianghu*” (retire from politics). These elegant phrases are composed of four Chinese characters chosen according to classical rules for syntactical and tonal parallelisms. Martial arts novels have also created a battery of less poetic, but still archaic-sounding, idioms in modern Chinese. “*Shiba ban wuyi juquan*,” an expression that originally refers to the mastery of all “eighteen types of martial arts and weapons,” is now commonly used as a compliment on a person’s versatility and resourcefulness in cooking, schoolwork, or professional development. The martial technique unique to the Murong family in Jin Yong’s *Tianlong Babu*, “*yi bi zhi dao, huan zhi qi shen*,” has become a Chinese expression for “an eye for eye.” The standard formula for the exchange of pleasantries, greetings, or declarations of combat in martial arts dialogues have also been integrated into contemporary Chinese. “*Mingnian de jintian jiushi nide jiri*” (exactly one year from today will be the anniversary of your death) is a convoluted way of predicting an opponent’s doom that is parodied over and over again in contemporary novels, advertisements, magazines, and TV shows. “*Houhui youqi*” (a date has been selected by heaven for our next meeting in this life) has become a facetious way of saying goodbye in the Chinese language. The widespread use of martial arts phrases out of context in modern Chinese testifies to the affinity between martial arts and language.

The martial arts novel’s motifs have also had a discernible impact on modern Chinese language. *Zhaoshi*, martial “stances” or “techniques,” are commonly used to refer to mahjong games, political campaign strategies, and tips for students at cram schools. Commercial presses publish study guides and try to sell study guides to
students by referring to them as “miji” (Secret Scriptures). In the media, Jin Yong’s and Gu Long’s characters are frequently used as shorthand for the archetypes of politicians: “Yue Buqun” (from Jin Yong’s State of Divinity) is a twofaced, backstabbing weasel who pretends to be a Confucian gentleman. “Zuo Lengchan” is a politician who prefers brute, naked domination and often fails in the end. “Heibai Langjun” is somebody who finds joy in others’ failure, Schadenfreude. Martial arts culture has become a significant element of Chinese cultural semiotics beyond the confines of film and consumer culture.

**China’s Homeric Epic**

Since the 1990s, the martial arts novel has undergone a significant reversal of fortune in the opinion of Chinese critics and cultural authorities. Doctoral dissertations on the topic mushroomed across Chinese universities; research centers, archives, and international conferences have come into being. The study of the best-selling martial arts novelist, Jin Yong, is now a newly baptized subbranch of academic studies—“Jin-ology” (jinxue)—in a manner analogous to hongxue, the dedicated specialization in the study of Hongloumeng (Dream of the Red Chamber), or to Shakespeare Studies in the West. A full series devoted to Jin-ology has appeared from Yuanliu Press, which includes both monographs on Jin Yong’s individual works and global exegeses of his philosophy, worldview, and stylistics. An asteroid was named after Jin Yong, and the martial arts novelist was the first living person in China to be honored by a bronze statue—a two-million-yuan structure erected on an island in his birth province, Zhejiang. Jin Yong is currently the best-selling living Chinese author, with an official record of 300 million copies sold, and untold numbers of bootleg copies. Jin Yong has been nominated for the Nobel Prize. Excerpts of his novels are now included in the official textbooks in secondary education in mainland China. In 1994, an authoritative new history of modern Chinese literature written by professors in Beijing identified Jin Yong as China’s fourth greatest author (after Lu Xun, Shen Congwen, and
Ba Jin). Of the four “masters” of modern Chinese literature recognized by critics in Beijing, Jin Yong is not only the sole living author from the post-1949 period, but also the only “Hong Kong” author. The fin-de-siècle canonization of Jin Yong is a testament to the exceptional cultural power of wuxia, which is even more striking when we consider the limited (by wuxia standards) number of Jin Yong’s works. Jin Yong has written only fifteen martial arts novels in his life, although they have spawned endless remakes in the media since the 1970s. Every year there is a new television series based on one of his novels. As with Jane Austen’s legacy in the Anglophone world—only six novels to work with, but the movies never quit coming—Jin Yong’s works offer an emotional richness that seems inexhaustible, a vitality that continues to speak to men and women of the twenty-first century, decades after the original stories were conceived and published.

The “Jin Yong phenomenon,” as critics are now calling it, signifies more than an emerging literary canon or merely changing conditions of literary evaluation. Comprehended historically, the rise of martial arts studies has profound implications for postcolonial studies and our understanding of what constitutes a colonial situation. While a previous generation of scholars tended to understand colonialism in a more literal sense as territorial occupation, we are now much more aware of colonialism’s discursive workings in the production of identities and subject positions. Newer postcolonial theory has taught us to recognize the ways in which colonialism reproduces itself as the anticolonial nationalist elite’s attitude toward their own past. As the subaltern studies scholar Partha Chatterjee argues, the dominant West not only colonizes non-Western peoples and territories, but their imagination as well. Martial arts literature provides an opportunity for us to reevaluate the assumption, promulgated since the May Fourth period, that Chinese modernity could only be attained through the negation and destruction of its own traditions. Martial arts literature challenges our conventional sense that literary modernity belonged to those “iconoclasts” who promoted the Europeanization of the Chinese language. The submerged political history of martial arts literature reveals one of the modes in which a desire for the West and its rationalism colonized Chinese intellectuals’ consciousness in
their self-appointed roles as saviors of the nation. For Liu Zaifu, Jin Yong’s achievements and the reasons for his newfound canonicity reside precisely in his ability to develop an “anti-Europeanized Chinese writing” against the May Fourth enlightenment ideology and Europeanized sentence structures, and Jin Yong’s writing has succeeded in preserving China’s “accumulated cultural treasures.”

Li Tuo takes the argument further to suggest that Jin Yong has invented a new vernacular that is *sui generis*, distinct from both the Europeanized syntax of modern Chinese and traditional vernacular Chinese, where the inventiveness of Jin Yong’s language provides the most vital resistance to the ossification of literary creativity between May Fourth and the rise of “Maoist discourse” (*Mao wenti*) during the Cultural Revolution era. Wang Ban’s view summarizes the significance of the Jin Yong phenomenon: “From this literary lineage, Jin Yong’s work arose as a challenge to this lopsided view that China could only become modern by discarding traditional culture.”

In a pioneering book, Song Weijie argues that martial arts novels serve as the repository of what Paul Ricoeur, Richard Dyer, and Fredric Jameson have called “the Utopian impulse” of society: the collective desire for a classless society that the development of capitalism fails to suppress. Building on these views, I argue in this book that martial arts literature offers an important form of subaltern resistance to the logic of internalized colonialism. If what made the martial arts novel aesthetically disreputable half a century ago is also what makes it a privileged object of cultural studies today, we have in this genre a unique opportunity to understand the lost organicity of Chinese culture before the bureaucratic rationalization of modernity. The mythical time of the *wuxia* imaginary belongs to the time of pre-capital; it constitutes an idealized space in which the subject and the object of social life are still unified before their fragmentation by the advent of capitalist modernity. What was once considered the result of an infectious, commodified mass culture is today China’s Homeric epic.

What difference, then, does it make when we cease to view this form of literature as the stuff of cheaply produced B-list midnight movies and the window on the colonial psyche of the Chinese people, and instead begin to view it as a serious mode of social thought,
as an intellectual resource of importance for contemporary theory and cultural practice from which all global citizens have something to learn? Inspired by Guattari and Deleuze’s notion of “minor literature,” Meaghan Morris characterizes martial arts film as “minor cinema” that serves as a critical pedagogical tool in the classroom for the study of class consciousness. While “major cinema” is “global” (difference-denying), “minor cinema” is “transnational” (community-building). For Morris, martial arts cinema is a historical example of how a minor cinema from a distant culture (Hong Kong) can reshape world culture through the preservation of spaces that are rapidly disappearing—urban slums, motels, buses, factories, and other “any-space-whatever” filled with distressed futures and chronic dereliction and loss—against the apocalyptic, spectacular, U.S. patriotic (“saving the world”) or global folkloric design of Hollywood’s big-budget major cinema. Similarly, Vijay Prashad observes in an important book on Afro-Asian connections that, historically, martial arts culture has produced political solidarity and interracial cross-identification between oppressed peoples across the globe—a strange “alliance between the Red Guard and the Black Panthers” from the Cultural Revolution in China to the Civil Rights movement in the States—that is otherwise unthinkable. What Prashad cleverly terms “Kung Fusion” indicates a form of “polycultural” communication that is distinct from the multiculturalist celebration of diversity (similar to Morris’s distinction between the transnational and the global). Amy Abugo Ongiri argues that by recognizing the historical role played by kung fu visual icons in the formation of a Black aesthetic that she calls “spectacular Blackness,” and by recognizing the interconnections and dialogues between Asians and African Americans, we can refuse America’s racial ideological landscape that constructs these communities as polar opposites in debates surrounding affirmative action and the model minority myth. These are only a few examples of critical uses of the lessons of martial arts today. The boundless political possibilities of critical martial arts are something we are only beginning to imagine now.
NOTES

1. Bruce Cumings describes the end of the Cold War and the collapse of Western communism as a crisis of political management for the American university-state intelligence-foundation nexus: “Lacking a clear enemy and worried about their budgets, forces within the [Clinton administration] national security state sought to reposition China as another Soviet Union requiring ‘containment.’” *Parallax Visions*, 178–179.


3. See Robert Eng, “Is HERO a Paean to Authoritarianism?” for an analysis of the relation between Zhang’s film and Chinese nationalism. John Eperjesi argues in “*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*: Kung Fu Diplomacy and the Dream of Cultural China” that “kung fu” has taken the place of “pandas” as tokens of culture in maintaining peaceful Sino-American relations. Eperjesi believes that martial arts film allows the Chinese diaspora to imagine themselves as members of a “cultural China,” a thesis that is similar to Chris Hamm’s interpretation of the ideological role of Jin Yong’s serialized novels. Both Tina Klein’s and Sheldon Lu’s works pay special attention to the material conditions of the production of martial arts films, which are often financed by major U.S. companies but shot on sites with abundant cheap labor, such as China. Both Sheldon Lu in his “*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, Bouncing Angels*” and Minh–Ha T. Pham in “*The Asian Invasion in Hollywood*” see the rise of martial arts cinema as “the end of national cinema” in film theory and history.

4. The phrase *wuxia xiaoshuo* first entered the Chinese language in 1915, in a magazine called *Xiaoshuo daguan*. The first *wuxia* story, “Fumeishi,” was written by the famous translator and scholar Lin Shu in Classical Chinese, although the full-length *wuxia* novels were written in Modern Chinese. Chinese scholars call the *wuxia* novels written on the Mainland during the Republican period (1912–1949) “*jiu pai,*” Old School martial arts novels, in contrast to works by the “*xin pai,*” New School luminaries in postwar Hong Kong and Taiwan. The major Old School authors are Pingjiang Buxiaosheng (born Xiang Kairan, 1890–1957), Zhao Huanting (1877–1951), Gu Mingdao (1897–1944), Wang Dulu (Wang Baoxiang, 1909–1977), and Huanzhu Louzhu (Li Shoumin, 1902–1961). The New School is spearheaded by Wolongsheng (Niu Heting, 1930–1997), Sima Ling (Wu Siming, 1933–1989), Zhuge Qingyun (Zhang Jianxin, 1929–1996), Jin Yong (Zha Liangyong or Louis Cha, 1924–), Gu Long (Xiong Xiaohua, 1936–1985), and Liang Yusheng (Chen Wentong, 1926–).
5. Qu Qiubai, “Jihede de shidai” (The era of Don Quixote).
7. Tu, Weiming, Confucian Ethics Today.
8. The relation between Asian American racialization in the domestic context and American ascendancy in the Asia Pacific has been brilliantly explored by Colleen Lye. “[T]he domestic signification of Asian Americans [as capable of upward mobility without the aid of state-engineered correctives] has its counterpart in the global signification of Asia. While the new visibility of an Asian-American middle class was being used to support a neocorporative-led ‘retreat from race’ in domestic public policy, the expanding economies of the newly industrialized countries of East Asia—the ‘Asian Tigers’—were being heralded by free market critics of import-substitution as evidence of the conceptual and political ‘end of the Third World.’” America’s Asia, 2–3.
9. For a historical study of China’s responses to Western encroachments as a series of state, nation, and party building projects, see Fitzgerald, Awakening China.
10. For an example of a work that considers late imperial works (such as Three Knights and Five Gallants) as martial arts fiction, see Paize Keulemans’s excellent Sounds of the Novel.
11. Leo Lee and Perry Link point out that another key difference was that xiayi fiction often depended on public performances such as operas and local storytellers for their transmission, while wuxia novels were from their inception inseparable from the rise of the modern information structure. “The Beginnings of Mass Culture,” 360–395.
12. David Wang, Fin-de-siècle Splendor, 117–182.
13. “The martial arts novel” is the preferred translation used in this book. Other critics have used names such as Chinese knight-errant fiction, Chinese gallant fiction, tales of swords and chivalry, fiction of swordplay, among others.
14. Several histories of martial arts literature published in the late 1980s and 1990s popularized the interpretation of the rise of martial arts literature as a wish-fulfillment for a colonial need for pleasure and escape. These include Cao Zhengwen’s Zhongguo xia wenhua shi, Ye Hongsheng’s “Zhongguo wuxia xiaoshuo shi lun,” Luo Liqun’s Zhongguo wuxia xiaoshuo shi, Chen Pingyuan’s Qiangu wenren xiake meng, and Wang Hailin’s Zhongguo wuxia xiaoshuo shi lüe (1988). These scholars maintain that, since the late nineteenth century, China was ravaged by imperialist countries and plagued by a corrupt, ineffectual Qing court. As the traditional distinction between good and evil afforded by Confucian and Buddhist cosmologies collapsed, people
formed collective fantasies about martial heroes and hoped they would mend the ills of society. As Cao put it, martial arts fiction was created to serve a nostalgic, compensatory, and escapist function under colonialism. They characterize the genre as “adult fairy tale” (chengren tonghua), “utopian impulse” (wutuobang chongdong), “popular fiction” (dazhong wenhua, tongsu wenhua), and “mass entertainment” (yule meijie).

15. For a definition of literature as self-conscious artifacts that call attention to the workings of language (“literariness”), see Jonathan Culler, The Pursuit of Signs.


17. For technical analyses, see Ed Gunn, Rewriting Chinese. For intellectual and social backgrounds, see Chow Tse-tsung, The May Fourth Movement, esp. 277–278. For a historical investigation of the international factors that produced the “problem” of the Chinese script (such as Soviet influence and Japan’s genbun itchi movement), see John DeFrancis, Nationalism and Language Reform in China.


22. Against the scholarly tendency to read May Fourth translations of Western thought as a reactive formation, Lydia Liu has powerfully reinterpreted Chinese modernity as “co-authorship,” emphasizing modernity’s complex and overdetermined routes of cross-cultural dissemination and reinventions. See Translingual Practice.

23. Lin Baochun, Taiwan wuxia xiaoshuo fazhan shi (The development of martial arts fiction in Taiwan).

24. See Cao, Zhengwen, Xia wenhua (The culture of xia), 103–105; and Hu, Zhongquan, Wuxia xiaoshuo yanjiu cankao ziliao (Research materials on wuxia xiaoshuo), 15–24.

25. For a detailed discussion of the genealogy of the characters and their differential representations of Taoist, Buddhist, and Confucian strands of thought, see Ye Hongsheng, Shushan jianxia pinglun (Commentary on Shushan jianxia), 1–27.


27. On the distinctively local structure of address that is responsible for the
film’s success, see S.V. Srinivas, “Kung Fu Hustle: A Note on the Local.”

28. Jin Yong’s Divine Eagle, Gallant Knight, for example, argues that the culture of wuxia expresses the unity of wen (letters) and wu (might): “Literature and martial arts are different means that serve the same aim” (Vol. II, 21).

29. For an analysis of the canonization of martial arts fiction as China’s “new cultural revolution,” see Yan Jiayan, Shiji de zuyin, 185–189.

30. The phrase “Jinxue yanjiu” was first invented by Shen Deng’en. See Chen Shuo, Jingdian zhizao, 82.


35. Li Tuo, “The Language of Jin Yong’s Writing: A New Direction in the Development of Modern Chinese.”


37. Song Weijie, Cong yule xingwei dao wutuobang chongdong.

38. My analysis of martial arts literature and social fragmentation parallels Lukács’s interpretation capitalism as the atomization of the organic totality of humanity in History and Class Consciousness. While Lukács identifies a dichotomy between two historically successive artistic forms—the Greek epic, which has neither a beginning nor an end, and the novel, whose formal features allow for the representation of the bourgeois individual—my analysis engages two contemporaneous narrative forms in a colonial context.

39. See also her “Learning from Bruce Lee: Pedagogy and Political Correctness in Martial Arts Cinema.”


41. Vijay Prashad, Everybody was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity.

42. Amy Ongiri, ”He Wanted to Be Just Like Bruce Lee: African Americans, Kung Fu Theater and Cultural Exchange at the Margins.” For another illuminating analysis of the connection, see Gina Marchetti, “Jackie Chan and the Black Connection.”
Paper Swordsmen: Jin Yong and the Modern Chinese Martial Arts Novel (2005), uses the status of Hong Kong as a British colony to explain the author’s popular appeal to the masses, characterizing his martial arts novels as the embodiment of “a heroic and erotic nationalism.” According to Hamm, Jin Yong’s writings signify the increasing dominance of “an essentialized and celebratory Chinese cultural identity” over a “consciousness of loss and displacement,” which serves as “a point of reference and token of continuity amidst the uncertainties of existence” for the citizens of Hong Kong. Hamm points out that all of Jin Yong’s novels were originally serialized in Hong Kong’s newspapers before appearing in book form, and he argues on this basis that Jin Yong’s martial arts fiction exemplifies Benedict Anderson’s theory of “print-capitalism”—the ability of serialized fiction to create sentiments of diasporic nationalism by allowing readers who have never met each other to imagine themselves as members of a coherent national community: cultural China. In the final analysis, Hamm’s explanation is a psychologizing one. His argument suggests that martial arts literature is a result of the colonial inferiority complex of the citizens of the British Crown Colony. The popularity of the genre is explained by its ideological persuasive-ness rather than its intellectual depth.

This common explanation of martial arts fiction as the ideological instrument of Chinese nationalism, however, has generated a bewildering array of contradictory conclusions. Recent martial arts films such as Hero (2002), Kung Fu Hustle (2004), House of Flying Daggers (2004), and Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (2000) have led critics to characterize the genre as a paean to Chinese authoritarianism, a representation of diasporic consciousness, an apologia for Chinese unification, cultural resistance to Sinocentrism from the margins, an instrument of China’s “kung fu diplomacy,” an index of the exploitation of third-world labor by a Hollywood-centered, capitalist regime of “flexible production,” or the reverse cultural colonization of America by Asia—an “Asian invasion of Hollywood.” While these interpretations contradict one another in their assessment of particular texts’ relation to Chinese nationalism, they share one thing in common: the assumption that martial arts fiction is a
by-product of China’s colonial and postcolonial histories, and that therefore the economic and political organizations of China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan (semicolonial, postcolonial, capitalist, socialist, or postsocialist) should serve as the prevailing analytical framework for our interpretation of this literature.

Stateless Subjects: Chinese Martial Arts Literature and Postcolonial History is the first full-length English-language study of the literary genre of wuxia xiaoshuo. It explores the forgotten history and aesthetics of a genre whose vital contributions to the development of modern Chinese culture have been suppressed and marginalized as merely popular entertainment. Traditional “state-centered” interpretations emphasize the problem of Chinese identity and the role of the nation-state in the production of the martial arts text. Far from signifying a singular attitude toward the Chinese nation, however, martial arts literature has demonstrated a remarkable ability to unify ideological opposites, an ability that is compounded with the genre’s antisystemic, rhizomatous dispersion across many registers of social discourse. In the popular imaginary, martial arts are commonly associated with ideas of harmony, inner peace, Zen, meditation, alternative medicine, and respect for all sentient beings. They also suggest a human tendency toward aggression and bear an affinity with the realist or pragmatist school of political science that argues for the inevitability of conflict and violence in human civilization. It is also true that images of kung fu readily invoke traumatic memories of war, nationalism, banditry, and political chaos. The malleable nature of martial arts fiction allows it to be assimilated to political claims about the “Sick Man of Asia” and “China rising” with equal ease. Punitive readings emphasize China’s degenerative tendency, citing martial arts as evidence that traditional thinking still holds sway in a country that stubbornly refuses to modernize and open its door to the West. Early twentieth-century Chinese intellectuals, such as Qu Qubai, characterized martial arts fiction as an escapist fantasy, “the dreams of flying swords and kung fu” that deflected the Chinese people’s revolutionary consciousness and receptivity to Marxism. Similarly, contemporary Chinese scholars such as Cao Zhengwen explain the rise of the martial arts
novel in early twentieth-century China as psychological compensation for foreign imperialism, warlordism, and ineffectual government. By contrast, triumphant accounts of the “East Asian Economic Miracle” discover in martial arts a presumably unique cultural ethic that is responsible for China’s accelerated growth in the postsocialist period. Those who applaud the virtues of martial arts read the cinematic and literary depictions of a willingness to endure the trials and tribulations of “cruel training” as evidence for the existence of a “Confucian ethics” analogous to Weber’s postulation of the Protestant spirit of capitalism, arguing that this cultural spirit of sheer determination and hard work has allowed a formerly third-world country to overwrite the historical laws of colonial subjugation to reemerge as the epicenter of global finance and industrial output—the international equivalent of the “model minority myth” in the U.S. domestic context.

Just as the ideological message of martial arts literature is anything but unambiguously nationalist, its cast of characters encompasses a wide spectrum of social and class roles, ranging from monks with white eyebrows flying on magical carpets to hypermuscular ex-socialist athletes. Whereas the image of the emaciated peasant militia accompanies many a history textbook’s representation of modern China as a backward nation torn by war, strife, and third-world underdevelopment, the martial Chinese body is also a recurring image in the media that exemplifies an exceptional racial form of muscular prowess, agility, uniformity, and numerical superiority, one that presages the decline of the West and the coming of the “Pacific Century.” The discursive spaces occupied by martial arts characters are just as likely to be ancient bamboo forests as the postmodern Olympic complexes of Beijing’s Water Cube and Bird’s Nest. What travels under the name of martial arts forms the kernel of a perplexing series of narratives from and about China. To write the political history of martial arts is to investigate these persistent images as vehicles for what we have alternately taken to be a hopelessly stagnant and archaic civilization and a spectacularly rising site of postmodern consumerism.

That the same genre—and often the same works—can animate
Introduction

mutually contradictory views about China’s relation to the world is one of the most curious features of martial arts aesthetics. I argue in this book that a persistent desire to read martial arts narratives as national allegories has prevented us from developing a historical account of precisely what is interesting and complex about these works. Specifically, no sustained account of twentieth-century martial arts literature as literature—that is, as a historically determinate discourse with a unique set of aesthetic conventions, philosophical basis, institutional history, and thematic coherence—has been forthcoming. The lack of critical attention to the aesthetics of martial arts narratives stems, no doubt, from a widespread perception of martial arts fiction as potboilers for mass culture consumption that have little to say about serious politics. This perception itself rests on the even more fundamental assumption that politics is always state politics, which is precisely what, I will argue, the martial arts novel as a modern literary movement sets out to challenge. If one aim of the present book is to produce a descriptive account of the distinctive aesthetic properties of the genre, another is to resituate this genre as an interventionist and progressive cultural movement in twentieth-century Chinese intellectual history that invented the most important model of nonstatist political responsibility.

Classical European theories of the state since Hobbes, Rousseau, Smith, Hegel, and Marx explain the state as the bureaucratic institution designed to resolve the problem of private property. These theorists are keenly aware of the fact that, left to themselves, “the people” would destroy themselves through the pursuit of individual gain. The modern state purports to represent the general will of the people but in reality constrains it. The theory of classical jurisprudence represents an advance over an earlier model of natural law theory, which casts the state as the formal expression of an abstract form of harmony that originally emanated from God, nature, or some other higher moral authority.

The Chinese martial arts novel represents a radically different political philosophy of the state. In this aesthetic tradition, the state is neither the arbiter of justice nor the sphere of moral constraints that prevents civil society from destroying itself through its own
rapacity. On the contrary, the martial arts novel invents scenes of stateless subjects to explain the constitutive sociality of the self. Its discourse of jianghu (rivers and lakes) defines a public sphere unconnected to the sovereign power of the state, a sphere that is historically related to the idea of minjian (between the people) as opposed to the concept of tianxia (all under heaven) in Chinese philosophy. The martial arts novel presents the human subject as an ethical alterity, constituted by and dependent on its responsibilities to other human beings. It is through the recognition of this mutual interdependence, rather than the formal and positive laws of the state, that humanity manages to preserve itself despite rampant inequalities in privilege, rank, and status. As recounted by martial arts novels, the human subject is made and remade by forces that cannot be defined by positive laws of the state—rage, love, gender, morality, life and death. The formation of this stateless subject is incompatible with the liberal conception of an autonomous rights-bearing citizen.

Max Weber defined the state as the apparatus that monopolizes the legitimate use of violence. The Chinese martial arts novel shifts the arbiter of justice from the state to a special group of martial arts master idiomatically termed xia. This genre does not so much promote private use of violence as it opens up a nonstatist field of political considerations. Chinese martial arts novels dramatize scenarios of moral dilemmas beyond the purview of the nation-state and without recourse to its guarantees. The Chinese martial arts novel, in other words, can be seen as a thought experiment on this question: If we lived in a world where the meaning of politics were not reduced to the ballot-box, revolutions, fiscal crises, wars, and other trappings of governmentality, what would it mean to be a person of public responsibility? The fact that modern Chinese cultures produced such a thought experiment deserves a historical analysis, and the emergence of stateless literature in twentieth-century China provides a powerfully concrete counterexample to the widely accepted thesis that China’s response to foreign imperialism has always been the establishment of a strong modern nation-state.
The Martial Arts of China’s Culture War

Certain critics use “martial arts fiction” to refer to both pre–twentieth-century and modern works. We should note that late imperial works are called *xiayi* rather than *wuxia* fiction in Chinese and the two genres maintain different statuses in literary history. Stimulating works on *xiayi* have been produced—David Wang, for example, has powerfully argued that *xiayi* is an expression of the true but “repressed” origins of modern Chinese culture. There is much to gain, however, from a consideration of martial arts literature proper, the distinctiveness of its features, and its fate in modern China, and this move requires that we conceptually separate *wuxia* from its premodern predecessors.

Despite the global hypervisibility of martial arts cinema, no systematic study of this visual culture’s literary basis in Chinese fiction is available in English. *Wuxia* *xiaoshuo*, the literary tradition that gave rise to these cultural images and political paradoxes of martial arts, is a novelistic genre unique to Chinese literature that has no satisfactory translation in English. Known in the West primarily through poorly subtitled films, Chinese martial arts fiction is one of the most iconic and yet the most understudied forms of modern sinophone creativity. Current scholarship on the subject is characterized by three central assumptions that I argue against in this book: first, that martial arts fiction is the representation of a bodily spectacle that historically originated in Hong Kong cinema; second, that the genre came into being as an escapist fantasy that provided psychological comfort to the Chinese people during the height of imperialism; and third, that martial arts fiction reflects a patriotic attitude that celebrates the greatness of Chinese culture, which in turn is variously described as the China-complex, colonial modernity, essentialized identity, diasporic consciousness, anxieties about globalization, or other psychological difficulties experienced by the Chinese people during modernization. Contrary to these perceptions, *Stateless Subjects* re-interprets martial arts literature as a progressive intellectual critique of modernization theory. I will strive to demonstrate that martial arts culture was first invented as a poetic relation between words rather
than a visual relation between bodies. Not only did the historical rise of martial arts literature predate the rise of martial arts cinema but the culture of martial arts, even in its cinematic incarnations and adaptations, is explicitly concerned with literariness, the question of what makes literature distinct from other types of discourses.\footnote{15} Over and against commonly accepted interpretations of martial arts fiction as an apolitical form of escapist fantasy, this book presents it as a mode of intellectual intervention that has shaped the course of modern Chinese history.

The historical reason for the genre’s exclusion from the Chinese canon lies precisely in its distance from and incompatibility with Chinese nationalism, which since the Qing dynasty has been a campaign to reform literature with criteria derived from European experiences of modernity.\footnote{16} The expansion of modernization discourse into the sphere of literary production in the May Fourth period had rendered alternative (nonmodernization-based) philosophical and literary discourses illegitimate, and martial arts fiction, which has resisted Western models of instrumental reason and rational bureaucracy, was quickly branded as the feudal ideology of “Old China,” an obstacle that must be eradicated from the field of cultural production. While May Fourth intellectuals advocated Western thought as the basis for rapid modernization, martial arts novelists continued to draw upon China’s indigenous intellectual sources—Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and premodern literary models such as linked-chapter fiction. The martial arts novel in Chinese is renowned for the density of its classical poetic devices, historical allusions, philosophical precepts, and sophisticated plots. Indeed, the martial arts novel is the only genre in modern Chinese literature to be written in a semiclassical language after the early twentieth century, when the spoken vernacular Chinese (baihua) replaced Classical Chinese (wenyan) as the official language of literary communication.\footnote{17} Unlike the “universal language” of cinema, the semiclassical language of the martial arts novel is in fact inaccessible to the masses—a fact that bedeviled early twentieth-century Chinese revolutionaries’ attempts to frame the genre as merely “popular fiction.”\footnote{18} Viewing the difficulty of the Chinese language as the cause
of mass illiteracy, Chinese intellectuals after May Fourth movement systematically advocated the Europeanization of Chinese syntax or even the replacement of Chinese characters with Romanizations as a recipe for rapid modernization. As a result, martial arts novelists were quickly demonized as “traditionalists” who were holding China back from economic and military modernization. In lieu of martial arts fiction, Chinese reformers sought to create a “New Fiction” (xin wenxue) that could bridge the educational gap between the literary elite and the common masses. For Hu Shi, Chen Duxiu, and Mao Dun, the explosive growth, commercial successes, cultural influence, and greater number of martial arts novels posed a threat to the modernization project undertaken by New Fiction. The chief strategy adopted in the May Fourth crusade against martial arts fiction was to collapse the genre with “mandarin ducks and butterflies” (yuanyang hudie pai) fiction, stories about love published in Saturday and other less respected venues.

The label of popular fiction was nonetheless strictly a May Fourth construction. Before the rise of modernization discourse and developmental thinking in China, martial arts narratives were not seen as popular or even middle-brow fiction, but part of China’s high literary canon. The culture of martial arts has always been a normative and privileged theme in Chinese literature. In this light, it was perfectly natural for twentieth-century authors to continue developing this theme and capitalize on what had always been understood as a cultural achievement in Chinese letters. As indicated by James Liu’s important and massive 1967 study, *The Chinese Knight-Errant*, the philosophy of martial arts has permeated and dominated virtually every form of premodern Chinese literature for over two thousand years: philosophical treatises, *shi* and *ci* poetry, dynastic histories, *zawen* (“miscellaneous writings”), songs, Tang *chuanqi* (legends), Ming drama, and prose fiction. Indeed, two of the so-called Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese Literature (*sida qishu*) are explicit representations of the culture of martial arts: *Water Margin* and *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and despite being proto-martial arts novels, the two fourteenth-century classics have never been relegated to the status of popular fiction.
We can see that what May Fourth reformers objected to was not martial arts narratives as such, but the existence of such narratives in the twentieth century. Both Mao Zedong and Lu Xun wrote approvingly of premodern narratives of outlaws and martial valor, which they considered to be an expression of the people’s heroic struggles against feudal values, while accusing the modern descendants of the same works of corrupting the minds of the Chinese masses and blocking their revolutionary consciousness.20 After 1932, martial arts film was banned in China. Martial arts fiction was banned by both the Communist Party in China and the Nationalist government in Taiwan after 1949. In post-1949 mainland China, members of the League of Leftist Writers assumed leading positions in the PRC’s cultural bureaucracy and published literary histories that canonized (socialist) realism as “modern Chinese literature.” Nonrealist trends in early twentieth-century China, such as martial arts fiction, were removed from literary history.21 The story of modern Chinese literature and Chinese modernity was subsequently told as a unilinear movement toward realism and Europeanized syntax, a feat accomplished through the translations, introductions, and appropriations of Western thought.22 With the decline and censorship of the genre on the mainland, Hong Kong became the new center for martial arts film and literature after 1949, although Taiwan also produced a significant number of talented and prolific authors despite censorship. The literary historian Lin Baochun actually considers the early period under martial law (1961–1970) to be Taiwan’s “golden age of martial arts literature.”23

One of the most salient characteristics of the martial arts novel is its length. The extraordinary number of wuxia works across the twentieth-century makes the genre an unprecedented phenomenon in Chinese literary history. By a conservative count, more than two hundred major novels in the Republican period were published as wuxia xiaoshuo, usually of extraordinary length—Huanzhu Louzhu’s entire corpus consists of no less than an astronomical 10,000,000 words, thirty times the length of Proust’s Swann’s Way.24 His unfinished magnum opus, Shushan jianxia zhuan (Swordsmen from the Shu Mountains), was serialized in the newspaper Tianfeng Bao
over a span of seventeen years (1932 to 1949), and the project was aborted only because of the Communist Revolution in 1949. The extant chapters of *Shushan jianxia zhuàn* were later published in book form in fifty-five separate volumes, with 329 chapters chronicling the rise and fall of more than a thousand different fictional characters. By the end of 1949, at least 170 major authors had published wuxia stories in different periodicals. The most prolific martial arts novelist, Zheng Zhengyin, published 102 different titles. Huanzhu Louzhu has thirty-six works to his name, while Gu Mingdao and Wang Dulu each wrote more than twenty novels before they were forced to abandon their craft under the new government.

Martial arts texts’ concern with literariness is foregrounded by the recurring motif of the “Secret Scripture” (miji). A standard formula in wuxia films and novels, the Secret Scripture is a lost or carefully guarded ancient text that endows its owner with superhuman combat abilities; the competition or quest for this book forms the main plot of many wuxia stories. Significantly, the Secret Scripture is not a training manual with pictorial illustrations of martial moves, but a verbal text written in Classical Chinese (or sometimes in Sanskrit). The Secret Scripture contains instructions that guide the protagonist through a series of inner or spiritual transformations, which is, however, possible only if the protagonist is literate—that is, if the character has access to what in the real world would be termed the educational capital of the dominant class. The narrative tradition of the Secret Scripture is the subject of Stephen Chow’s critically acclaimed 2004 parody of the genre, *Kung Fu Hustle*, in which Yuen Wooping (Yuan Heping), the legendary action cinema choreographer behind *Matrix* and *Kill Bill*, plays the character of a beggar who sells “fake” manuals that turn out to be real Secret Scriptures for the protagonist, played by Stephen Chow himself. The inside joke for those who recognize Yuen is that the action choreographer is the creator of fantastic martial arts, while the wirework, trampolines, and computer-generated images are the real Secret Scriptures. The joke draws its comedic power from a local knowledge of the genre’s tendency to reference textual artifacts. Accordingly, the protagonist of the stories is almost
always a scholar rather than a fighter. This choice of protagonist is, of course, consistent with the genre’s advocacy of book learning as the source of martial power.

Wuxia is a self-consciously literary discourse that draws attention to the aesthetic properties of language. Its aim is to translate classical Chinese literary and cosmological concepts into a large corpus of easily quotable, memorable phrases. These wuxia phrases have by now become endemic in speech situations unrelated to martial arts, such as “shenhuai jueji” (a skilled but self-effacing person), “yitong jianghu” (unify the nation), “jinpen xishou” (close one’s business), and “tuichu jianghu” (retire from politics). These elegant phrases are composed of four Chinese characters chosen according to classical rules for syntactical and tonal parallelisms. Martial arts novels have also created a battery of less poetic, but still archaic-sounding, idioms in modern Chinese. “Shiba ban wuyi juquan,” an expression that originally refers to the mastery of all “eighteen types of martial arts and weapons,” is now commonly used as a compliment on a person’s versatility and resourcefulness in cooking, schoolwork, or professional development.

The martial technique unique to the Murong family in Jin Yong’s Tianlong Babu, “yi bi zhi dao, huan zhi qi shen,” has become a Chinese expression for “an eye for eye.” The standard formula for the exchange of pleasantries, greetings, or declarations of combat in martial arts dialogues have also been integrated into contemporary Chinese. “Mingnian de jintian jiushi nide jiri” (exactly one year from today will be the anniversary of your death) is a convoluted way of predicting an opponent’s doom that is parodied over and over again in contemporary novels, advertisements, magazines, and TV shows. “Houhui youqi” (a date has been selected by heaven for our next meeting in this life) has become a facetious way of saying goodbye in the Chinese language.

The widespread use of martial arts phrases out of context in modern Chinese testifies to the affinity between martial arts and language.

The martial arts novel’s motifs have also had a discernible impact on modern Chinese language. Zhaoshi, martial “stances” or “techniques,” are commonly used to refer to mahjong games, political campaign strategies, and tips for students at cram schools. Commercial presses publish study guides and try to sell study guides to
students by referring to them as “miji” (Secret Scriptures). In the media, Jin Yong’s and Gu Long’s characters are frequently used as shorthand for the archetypes of politicians: “Yue Buqun” (from Jin Yong’s State of Divinity) is a twofaced, backstabbing weasel who pretends to be a Confucian gentleman. “Zuo Lengchan” is a politician who prefers brute, naked domination and often fails in the end. “Heibai Langjun” is somebody who finds joy in others’ failure, Schadenfreude. Martial arts culture has become a significant element of Chinese cultural semiotics beyond the confines of film and consumer culture.

China’s Homeric Epic

Since the 1990s, the martial arts novel has undergone a significant reversal of fortune in the opinion of Chinese critics and cultural authorities. Doctoral dissertations on the topic mushroomed across Chinese universities; research centers, archives, and international conferences have come into being. The study of the best-selling martial arts novelist, Jin Yong, is now a newly baptized subbranch of academic studies—“Jin-ology” (jinxue)—in a manner analogous to hongxue, the dedicated specialization in the study of Hongloumeng (Dream of the Red Chamber), or to Shakespeare Studies in the West. A full series devoted to Jin-ology has appeared from Yuanliu Press, which includes both monographs on Jin Yong’s individual works and global exegeses of his philosophy, worldview, and stylistics. An asteroid was named after Jin Yong, and the martial arts novelist was the first living person in China to be honored by a bronze statue—a two-million-yuan structure erected on an island in his birth province, Zhejiang. Jin Yong is currently the best-selling living Chinese author, with an official record of 300 million copies sold, and untold numbers of bootleg copies. Jin Yong has been nominated for the Nobel Prize. Excerpts of his novels are now included in the official textbooks in secondary education in mainland China. In 1994, an authoritative new history of modern Chinese literature written by professors in Beijing identified Jin Yong as China’s fourth greatest author (after Lu Xun, Shen Congwen, and
Of the four “masters” of modern Chinese literature recognized by critics in Beijing, Jin Yong is not only the sole living author from the post-1949 period, but also the only “Hong Kong” author. The fin-de-siècle canonization of Jin Yong is a testament to the exceptional cultural power of *wuxia*, which is even more striking when we consider the limited (by *wuxia* standards) number of Jin Yong’s works. Jin Yong has written only fifteen martial arts novels in his life, although they have spawned endless remakes in the media since the 1970s. Every year there is a new television series based on one of his novels. As with Jane Austen’s legacy in the Anglophone world—only six novels to work with, but the movies never quit coming—Jin Yong’s works offer an emotional richness that seems inexhaustible, a vitality that continues to speak to men and women of the twenty-first century, decades after the original stories were conceived and published.

The “Jin Yong phenomenon,” as critics are now calling it, signifies more than an emerging literary canon or merely changing conditions of literary evaluation. Comprehended historically, the rise of martial arts studies has profound implications for postcolonial studies and our understanding of what constitutes a colonial situation. While a previous generation of scholars tended to understand colonialism in a more literal sense as territorial occupation, we are now much more aware of colonialism’s discursive workings in the production of identities and subject positions. Newer postcolonial theory has taught us to recognize the ways in which colonialism reproduces itself as the anticolonial nationalist elite’s attitude toward their own past. As the subaltern studies scholar Partha Chatterjee argues, the dominant West not only colonizes non-Western peoples and territories, but their imagination as well. Martial arts literature provides an opportunity for us to reevaluate the assumption, promulgated since the May Fourth period, that Chinese modernity could only be attained through the negation and destruction of its own traditions. Martial arts literature challenges our conventional sense that literary modernity belonged to those “iconoclasts” who promoted the Europeanization of the Chinese language. The submerged political history of martial arts literature reveals one of the modes in which a desire for the West and its rationalism colonized Chinese intellectuals’ consciousness in
their self-appointed roles as saviors of the nation. For Liu Zaifu, Jin Yong’s achievements and the reasons for his newfound canonicity reside precisely in his ability to develop an “anti-Europeanized Chinese writing” against the May Fourth enlightenment ideology and Europeanized sentence structures, and Jin Yong’s writing has succeeded in preserving China’s “accumulated cultural treasures.”

Li Tuo takes the argument further to suggest that Jin Yong has invented a new vernacular that is *sui generis*, distinct from both the Europeanized syntax of modern Chinese and traditional vernacular Chinese, where the inventiveness of Jin Yong’s language provides the most vital resistance to the ossification of literary creativity between May Fourth and the rise of “Maoist discourse” (*Mao wenti*) during the Cultural Revolution era. Wang Ban’s view summarizes the significance of the Jin Yong phenomenon: “From this literary lineage, Jin Yong’s work arose as a challenge to this lopsided view that China could only become modern by discarding traditional culture.”

In a pioneering book, Song Weijie argues that martial arts novels serve as the repository of what Paul Ricoeur, Richard Dyer, and Fredric Jameson have called “the Utopian impulse” of society: the collective desire for a classless society that the development of capitalism fails to suppress. Building on these views, I argue in this book that martial arts literature offers an important form of subaltern resistance to the logic of internalized colonialism. If what made the martial arts novel aesthetically disreputable half a century ago is also what makes it a privileged object of cultural studies today, we have in this genre a unique opportunity to understand the lost organicity of Chinese culture before the bureaucratic rationalization of modernity. The mythical time of the *wuxia* imaginary belongs to the time of pre-capital; it constitutes an idealized space in which the subject and the object of social life are still unified before their fragmentation by the advent of capitalist modernity. What was once considered the result of an infectious, commodified mass culture is today China’s Homeric epic.

What difference, then, does it make when we cease to view this form of literature as the stuff of cheaply produced B-list midnight movies and the window on the colonial psyche of the Chinese people, and instead begin to view it as a serious mode of social thought,
as an intellectual resource of importance for contemporary theory and cultural practice from which all global citizens have something to learn? Inspired by Guattari and Deleuze’s notion of “minor literature,” Meaghan Morris characterizes martial arts film as “minor cinema” that serves as a critical pedagogical tool in the classroom for the study of class consciousness.³⁹ While “major cinema” is “global” (difference-denying), “minor cinema” is “transnational” (community-building).⁴⁰ For Morris, martial arts cinema is a historical example of how a minor cinema from a distant culture (Hong Kong) can reshape world culture through the preservation of spaces that are rapidly disappearing—urban slums, motels, buses, factories, and other “any-space-whatever” filled with distressed futures and chronic dereliction and loss—against the apocalyptic, spectacular, U.S. patriotic (“saving the world”) or global folkloric design of Hollywood’s big-budget major cinema. Similarly, Vijay Prashad observes in an important book on Afro-Asian connections that, historically, martial arts culture has produced political solidarity and interracial cross-identification between oppressed peoples across the globe—a strange “alliance between the Red Guard and the Black Panthers” from the Cultural Revolution in China to the Civil Rights movement in the States—that is otherwise unthinkable.⁴¹ What Prashad cleverly terms “Kung Fusion” indicates a form of “polycultural” communication that is distinct from the multiculturalist celebration of diversity (similar to Morris’s distinction between the transnational and the global). Amy Abugo Ongiri argues that by recognizing the historical role played by kung fu visual icons in the formation of a Black aesthetic that she calls “spectacular Blackness,” and by recognizing the interconnections and dialogues between Asians and African Americans, we can refuse America’s racial ideological landscape that constructs these communities as polar opposites in debates surrounding affirmative action and the model minority myth.⁴² These are only a few examples of critical uses of the lessons of martial arts today. The boundless political possibilities of critical martial arts are something we are only beginning to imagine now.
NOTES

1. Bruce Cumings describes the end of the Cold War and the collapse of Western communism as a crisis of political management for the American university-state intelligence-foundation nexus: “Lacking a clear enemy and worried about their budgets, forces within the [Clinton administration] national security state sought to reposition China as another Soviet Union requiring ‘containment.’” Parallax Visions, 178–179.


3. See Robert Eng, “Is HERO a Paean to Authoritarianism?” for an analysis of the relation between Zhang’s film and Chinese nationalism. John Eperjesi argues in “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: Kung Fu Diplomacy and the Dream of Cultural China” that “kung fu” has taken the place of “pandas” as tokens of culture in maintaining peaceful Sino-American relations. Eperjesi believes that martial arts film allows the Chinese diaspora to imagine themselves as members of a “cultural China,” a thesis that is similar to Chris Hamm’s interpretation of the ideological role of Jin Yong’s serialized novels. Both Tina Klein’s and Sheldon Lu’s works pay special attention to the material conditions of the production of martial arts films, which are often financed by major U.S. companies but shot on sites with abundant cheap labor, such as China. Both Sheldon Lu in his “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, Bouncing Angels” and Minh–Ha T. Pham in “The Asian Invasion in Hollywood” see the rise of martial arts cinema as “the end of national cinema” in film theory and history.

4. The phrase wuxia xiaoshuo first entered the Chinese language in 1915, in a magazine called Xiaoshuo daguan. The first wuxia story, “Fumeishi,” was written by the famous translator and scholar Lin Shu in Classical Chinese, although the full-length wuxia story, “Fumeishi,” was written by the famous translator and scholar Lin Shu in Classical Chinese, although the full-length wuxia novels were written in Modern Chinese. Chinese scholars call the wuxia novels written on the Mainland during the Republican period (1912–1949) “jiu pai,” Old School martial arts novels, in contrast to works by the “xin pai,” New School luminaries in postwar Hong Kong and Taiwan. The major Old School authors are Pingjiang Buxiaosheng (born Xiang Kairan, 1890–1957), Zhao Huanting (1877–1951), Gu Mingdao (1897–1944), Wang Dulu (Wang Baoxiang, 1909–1977), and Huanzhu Louzhu (Li Shoumin, 1902–1961). The New School is spearheaded by Wolongsheng (Niu Heting, 1930–1997), Sima Ling (Wu Siming, 1933–1989), Zhuge Qingyun (Zhang Jianxin, 1929–1996), Jin Yong (Zha Liangyong or Louis Cha, 1924–), Gu Long (Xiong Xiaohua, 1936–1985), and Liang Yusheng (Chen Wentong, 1926–).
5. Qu Qiubai, “Jihede de shidai” (The era of Don Quixote).
7. Tu, Weiming, Confucian Ethics Today.
8. The relation between Asian American racialization in the domestic context and American ascendancy in the Asia Pacific has been brilliantly explored by Colleen Lye. “[T]he domestic signification of Asian Americans [as capable of upward mobility without the aid of state-engineered correctives] has its counterpart in the global signification of Asia. While the new visibility of an Asian-American middle class was being used to support a neoconservative-led ‘retreat from race’ in domestic public policy, the expanding economies of the newly industrialized countries of East Asia—the ‘Asian Tigers’—were being heralded by free market critics of import-substitution as evidence of the conceptual and political ‘end of the Third World.’” America’s Asia, 2–3.
9. For a historical study of China’s responses to Western encroachments as a series of state, nation, and party building projects, see Fitzgerald, Awakening China.
10. For an example of a work that considers late imperial works (such as Three Knights and Five Gallants) as martial arts fiction, see Paize Keulemans’s excellent Sounds of the Novel.
11. Leo Lee and Perry Link point out that another key difference was that xiayi fiction often depended on public performances such as operas and local storytellers for their transmission, while wuxia novels were from their inception inseparable from the rise of the modern information structure. “The Beginnings of Mass Culture,” 360–395.
12. David Wang, Fin-de-siècle Splendor, 117–182.
13. “The martial arts novel” is the preferred translation used in this book. Other critics have used names such as Chinese knight-errant fiction, Chinese gallant fiction, tales of swords and chivalry, fiction of swordplay, among others.
14. Several histories of martial arts literature published in the late 1980s and 1990s popularized the interpretation of the rise of martial arts literature as a wish-fulfillment for a colonial need for pleasure and escape. These include Cao Zhengwen’s Zhongguo xia wenhua shi, Ye Hongsheng’s “Zhongguo wuxia xiaoshuo shi lun,” Luo Liqun’s Zhongguo wuxia xiaoshuo shi, Chen Pingyuan’s Qiangu wenren xiake meng, and Wang Hailin’s Zhongguo wuxia xiaoshuo shi lüe (1988). These scholars maintain that, since the late nineteenth century, China was ravaged by imperialist countries and plagued by a corrupt, ineffectual Qing court. As the traditional distinction between good and evil afforded by Confucian and Buddhist cosmologies collapsed, people
formed collective fantasies about martial heroes and hoped they would mend the ills of society. As Cao put it, martial arts fiction was created to serve a nostalgic, compensatory, and escapist function under colonialism. They characterize the genre as “adult fairy tale” (chengren tonghua), “utopian impulse” (wutuobang chongdong), “popular fiction” (dazhong wenhua, tongsu wenhua), and “mass entertainment” (yule mejie).

15. For a definition of literature as self-conscious artifacts that call attention to the workings of language (“literariness”), see Jonathan Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs*.


17. For technical analyses, see Ed Gunn, *Rewriting Chinese*. For intellectual and social backgrounds, see Chow Tse-tsung, *The May Fourth Movement*, esp. 277–278. For a historical investigation of the international factors that produced the “problem” of the Chinese script (such as Soviet influence and Japan’s genbun itchi movement), see John DeFrancis, *Nationalism and Language Reform in China*.


22. Against the scholarly tendency to read May Fourth translations of Western thought as a reactive formation, Lydia Liu has powerfully reinterpreted Chinese modernity as “co-authorship,” emphasizing modernity’s complex and overdetermined routes of cross-cultural dissemination and reinventions. See *Translingual Practice*.


25. For a detailed discussion of the genealogy of the characters and their differential representations of Taoist, Buddhist, and Confucian strands of thought, see Ye Hongsheng, *Shushan jianxia pinglun* (Commentary on Shushan jianxia), 1–27.


27. On the distinctively local structure of address that is responsible for the
film’s success, see S.V. Srinivas, “Kung Fu Hustle: A Note on the Local.”

28. Jin Yong’s Divine Eagle, Gallant Knight, for example, argues that the culture of wuxia expresses the unity of wen (letters) and wu (might): “Literature and martial arts are different means that serve the same aim” (Vol. II, 21).

29. For an analysis of the canonization of martial arts fiction as China’s “new cultural revolution,” see Yan Jiayan, Shiji de zuyin, 185–189.

30. The phrase “Jinxue yanjiu” was first invented by Shen Deng’en. See Chen Shuo, Jingdian zhizao, 82.


35. Li Tuo, “The Language of Jin Yong’s Writing: A New Direction in the Development of Modern Chinese.”


37. Song Weijie, Cong yule xingwei dao wutuobang chongdong.

38. My analysis of martial arts literature and social fragmentation parallels Lukács’s interpretation capitalism as the atomization of the organic totality of humanity in History and Class Consciousness. While Lukács identifies a dichotomy between two historically successive artistic forms—the Greek epic, which has neither a beginning nor an end, and the novel, whose formal features allow for the representation of the bourgeois individual—my analysis engages two contemporaneous narrative forms in a colonial context.

39. See also her “Learning from Bruce Lee: Pedagogy and Political Correctness in Martial Arts Cinema.”


41. Vijay Prashad, Everybody was Kung Fu Fighting: Afro-Asian Connections and the Myth of Cultural Purity.

42. Amy Ongiri, ”He Wanted to Be Just Like Bruce Lee: African Americans, Kung Fu Theater and Cultural Exchange at the Margins.” For another illuminating analysis of the connection, see Gina Marchetti, “Jackie Chan and the Black Connection.”